



# ISIS:

## The Past, Present, and Future of the Islamic State

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### Abstract/ Key Questions

The so-called Islamic State (IS) has shocked the world with its intense brutality, the extent of its territorial and psychological control, and the speed with which it rose to power. I will approach the questions of what factors allowed and caused this group to come into power and to stay as strong as it has, and what might be expected for its future. I will provide summaries of



historical contexts within Iraq and Syria, the current economic and political situation in the Islamic State, and an analysis of its strengths and weaknesses based on internal and external factors, showing that although the battle with the Islamic State is not finished, the Caliphate ultimately cannot endure.

### Past: Reasons IS Exists

Challenges facing the entirety of the Middle East such as the youth bulge, droughts, ill-effects of ISI economic policies, and regional violence were magnified by conflict in Iraq and Syria. The sanction regime from 1990-2003, the First Gulf War of 1991, and the Anglo-American invasion of 2003, devastated Iraq's economy, health, education, military, and political system and the removal of the Baathist party from leadership and military positions resulted in the poor combination of armed, unemployed young men and a power vacuum. Syria was also devastated by the effects of their civil war, dropping in the Human Development Index from 83 in the 1990s to 134 in 2015 and the state was divided and discontent. The Islamic State, which had several name changes, broke from Al Qaeda in July of 2014, seizing weapons, taking advantage of their disunited opponents, and making huge advances very quickly.



### Present: Political Economy of IS

#### I. Economy

Part of the Islamic State's resilience is its diversity in revenue sources. These include the net 3-8 million USD/day potential oil reserves, which due to crippled infrastructure, cheapened underground markets, and heavy foreign air strikes, is only partially realized. Ransoms, citizen taxes (2.5% annual income), state fees such as traffic tickets and fines, agriculture, trade, misappropriation of cultural artifacts, human trafficking, escape bribes, and private donations also contribute. Control of wheat production territory (about 40% in Iraq) and several key dams are additional advantages, though inability to capitalize on these have left the majority of Iraqi and Syrian citizens food and water insecure. Disease and starvation, according to personal accounts and human rights organizations, are rampant and have worsened in recent months as the war on terror has had its effect. Healthcare, part of the IS propaganda campaign, is in ruins, fuel and power are limited, and employment outside of military consignment is scarce. Women are entirely economically excluded.



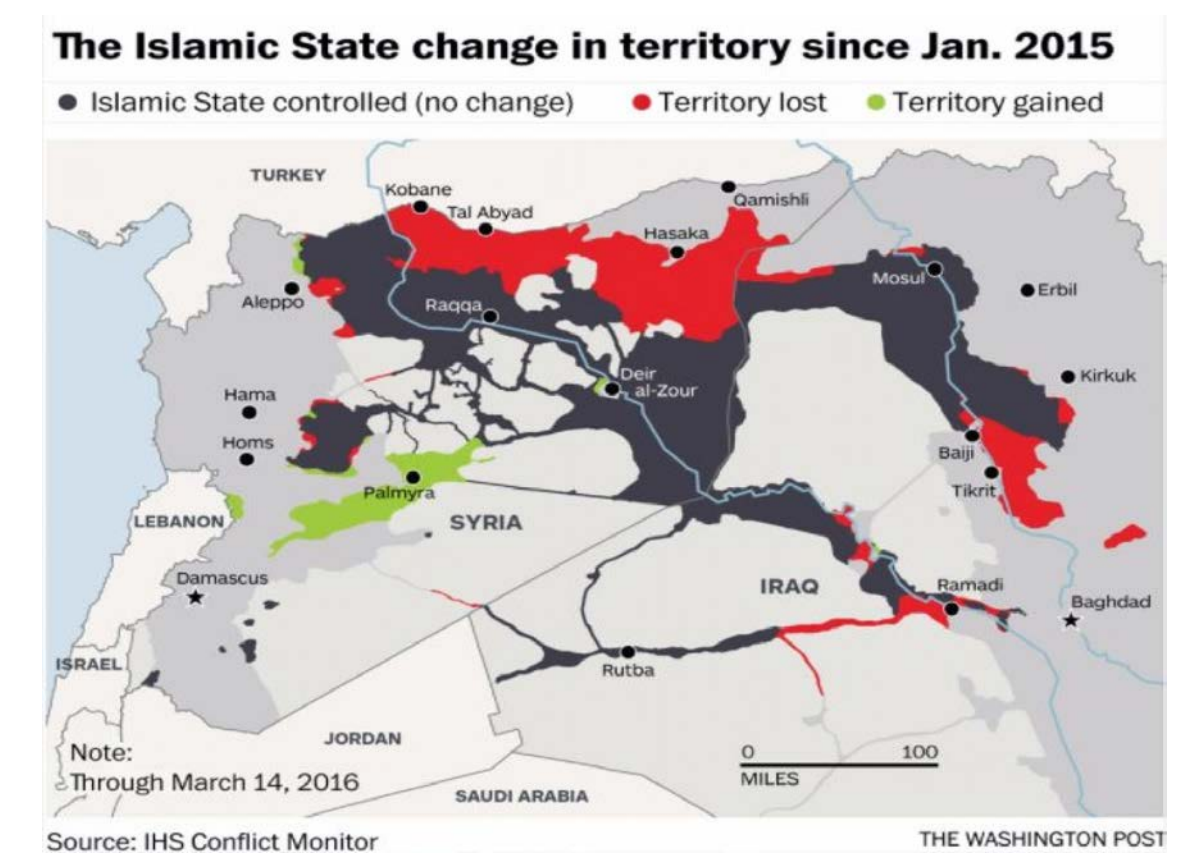
#### I. Political Structure

Self-declared "Caliph" Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is the head of the Islamic State Caliphate, a title loaded with historical and ideological significance, which translates practically into a state-run system lacking a constitution and encoded laws. Heads of Syria and Iraq, governors, local councils, the legal system, and government departments controlling everything from religion to garbage disposal, are all closely selected and controlled by executive leadership. The legal system deals with individual crime, religious transgressions, and treason, employing infamous punishments from lashes to beheadings. Crimes such as kidnap, torture, murder, genocide, and sex slavery are legally justified based on strict interpretations of Islamic scriptures. Women are socially restricted, and education has been reworked to exclude most subjects besides religion and military. Propaganda is key to the state's success; their social media and online presence have helped expand their army with as many as 31,000 foreign fighters from 86 countries [i].

### Future: Will IS Last?

#### I. Internal Analysis

Coercion, exploitation of tribal conflicts, and regional economic deals have lowered local resistance against IS and initial comparative economic relief and propaganda have elicited supporters. However, the increasingly dire economic situation is unsustainable and would prove incredibly difficult to reverse. The political system, through its brutality and utter control, is generating increasing internal discontent.



#### II. External Analysis

IS's military strength has been reflective of the weakness of its opponents, which, though they do not yet face ground troops, has shifted. IS has lost 22% of its territory in the past 15 months due to international attacks. This has not stopped the increase of their alleged international attacks, which has given them more enemies.

### Conclusion:

The Islamic State has several key assets that will allow it to survive for some time. The impact they have had on the area will take decades to reverse. This being said, they also do not have the resources, support, infrastructure, or organization to survive long term. Change is inevitable.

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